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ABSTRACT

The author presents a model of continuing education for social work, with the concept of lifelong learning as its philosophic base. Three components of the model represent three areas on which continuing education programs must focus. These are in-service training, or upgrading of professional knowledge; fulfillment of licensing requirements; and preparation for professional degrees. Preparation for professional degrees is a component of continuing education provided by many schools of social work. Its advantage is the provision of career advancement. However, it may not provide for specific problem-solving approaches sought by students or professionals. Upgrading of professional knowledge provides for a blending of academia and practice which is relevant for practitioners and also appropriate for level advancement. Social work has only recently begun to require continuing education as a licensing requirement. In this area, curriculum must be relevant to the needs and levels of each learner. The importance of the lifelong learning concept lies in the need to make continuing education for social work relevant not only to active professionals but also to young students and retired social workers. (Author/AV)

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LIFELONG LEARNING: AN APPROACH TO CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL WORK

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SO 010 492

LIFELONG LEARNING: AN APPROACH TO CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL WORK

The current literature is repleat with articles that focus on various aspects of continuing education for social work.

Certainly the profession has been involved in continuing education pursuits for many years. Social workers are perhaps more familiar with the term "in-service training" which is analogous to at least one aspect of continuing education.

In reviewing current articles on continuing education, some common themes begin to emerge.

Continuing education programs focus on at least three general, and not mutually exclusive, areas. One area is the upgrading of professional knowledge, heretofore "in-service training." Another area is the provision of continuing education in order to fulfill licensing requirements. A third area is related to preparation for professional levels (BSW, MSW, DSW/Ph.D.).

All three of these areas are of importance for social work education. In fact, as Walz suggests, "continuing education ... may at this point in our history be the most important educational task confronting social work."[1]

Walz' point cannot be contested in view of the specialized manpower needs of the decade ahead.[2] However, some perspective will be required so that continuing education will not become too narrowly focused.

It is the intent of this paper to suggest a model or view of continuing education which will provide for a broader approach to the provision of continuing education.

The model is based on a lifelong learning approach. The lifelong

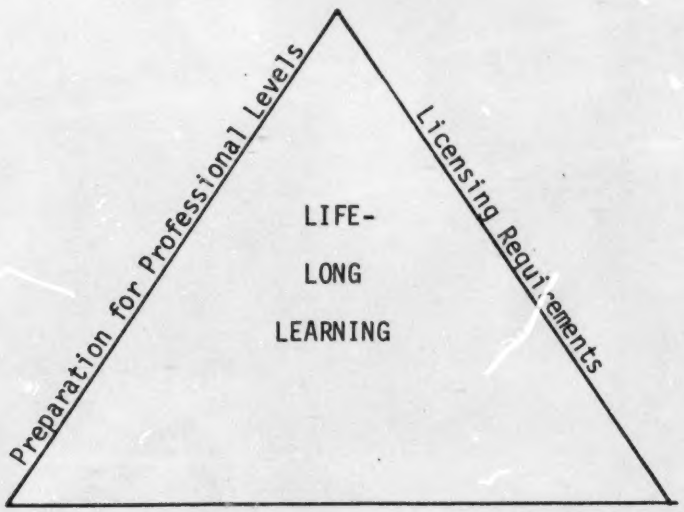
learning approach goes beyond continuing education in the sense that the former is founded on the philosophy that learning can and must be a lifelong process.

Indeed, one of the founders of the concept of lifelong learning, Malcolm Knowles, suggests by way of definition that:

> "It is no longer functional to define education as a process of transmitting what is known; it must now be defined as a lifelong learning process of discovering what is not known."[3]

The implication of lifelong learning hopefully suggests a responsibility to social work education. Provision should be made not only for the immediate continuing education needs of social work agencies and manpower, but also for the less tangible needs of pre and post-professionals, or those professionals seeking other than specific skill advancement.

The following model, then, is based on a lifelong learning approach, but is also composed of the three components of continuing education previously mentioned.



It is evident from the model that the components of continuing education all relate to one another. Each component in turn is based on the concept of lifelong learning. By utilizing this model as a conceptual approach to continuing education, the pitfall of a narrow, specialized focus can perhaps be avoided.

Let us now focus on each of the components of the model briefly. Each component will be discussed in light of its relationship to the concept of lifelong learning. Finally, the lifelong learning component will be explored as a common thread uniting the other components of the model.

Preparation for Professional Levels

Preparation for professional levels (BSW, MSW, DSW/Ph.D.) is a component of continuing education provided by many schools of social work. Often specific degree related courses are offered to practicing social workers who are willing and able to attend a university on a part-time basis.

This type of continuing education definitely serves a need for those close enough to a school of social work or to a branch campus program.

The advantage of this form of continuing education is the provision of career advancement. It may not, however, provide for specific problem solving approaches sought by student/professionals.

Fisher alludes to the dilemma faced by academic institutions in regard to providing traditional continuing education for public administrators.[4] The dilemma is clearly mirrored in the difficulty of designing professional preparation material that will also meet the specific learning needs of full-time professionals.

What social work education does not want to get into is the situation developing in the criminal justice field. As Gregg reports:

"Under the subsidies provided by large federal grants, one can see this ritualistic phenomenon in many urban police departments. Individual officers, seeing continuing education as a means of continuing the arbitrary and imposed promotional system, are dutifully going back to school in large numbers. Such schooling is seen by most officers as merely instrumental in aiding their vertical mobility within a department."[5]

In order to avoid this situation in social work, it is mandatory for the academic community to be closely aligned with the needs and experiences of practicing professionals.

As Yankey cautions:

"The agencies ... may complain that schools of social work don't prepare students to function in the "real" world of public welfare, and that graduating students who enter work roles in public agencies are often confused, dissatisfied, disruptive and easily disillusioned."[6]

Upgrading of Professional Knowledge (In-service Training)

The next component, upgrading of professional knowledge and experience provides for a blending of academia and practice. It is felt that this blend can and will make curriculum in the preceding component appropriate not only for level advancement but also relevant for practitioners.

Upgrading of professional knowledge and experience has been, and is a significant responsibility of the profession.

Allied human service professions such as psychology have also been concerned with upgrading of their practitioner's knowledge base.

Two important contributions related to continuing education come from an article by Jones. He notes that the half-life of a psychologist's knowledge

base is 10-12 years.

Some would appropriately argue that areas such as medical related social work have a significantly shorter knowledge half-life, perhaps as short as 2-5 years.

Secondly, Jones sees two distinct advantages of university involvement in continuing education. The university is the optimal disseminator of technical and scientific information germane to practice. Perhaps more importantly, the faculty and the professionals can gain from the mutual input from one another.[7]

A continuing education program that incorporates the adult learning principles of androgogy (Knowles: Adult Learning) is exemplified in an article by Cohen. In describing the National Experiment in Staff Development Project II, she mentions the following:

> "A continuing formal education program that is open ended seemed to lead to people's being less defensive and helped them to respond in more effective open ways."[8]

Licensing

The third component of the model relates to continuing education as a licensing requirement.

Although social work has just begun to require continuing education as a licensing requirement, other professions have moved more quickly into mandatory continuing education.

In a recent issue of the American Journal of Nursing, an article states that in nursing, "the move to mandatory continuing education in nursing, barely more than a ripple two years ago, is rapidly spreading."[9]

Licensing will have a similar effect on social work continuing education. With the increased demand on social work faculty for continuing education programs will come the concomitant responsibility of providing relevant

curriculum based on the needs and levels of the learner.

Flexibility will also be needed in regard to the provision of credit for continuing education programs. A statewide continuing education credit bank, based at a university, could easily be developed with nationwide linkage possible.

Many universities already have sophisticated continuing education credit transcripts which carry the same official seals as do degree related transcripts.

Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is a concept well defined by a 1975 lifelong learning bill introduced by then Senator Walter F. Mondale as "Programs Intended to Affect the Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes of Person's Who Have Left the Traditionally Sequenced Educational System."[10]

The primary message that lifelong learning brings to social work education is in the call for an approach to continuing education that has not only specific depth but also breadth.

Social work continuing education programs must be aware of not only the synergistic needs of professionals but also the developmental learning levels of potential continuing education students.

Social work education has, perhaps intuitively, fulfilled one essential criteria of lifelong learning. The individual must be prepared to approach his own professional development through an openness for continual education.

Indeed, Swack relates that:

> "Professional practice itself induces highly competent people to recognize that there are new things that they need to know immediately and other things that they will need to know a few years hence, some of which may not yet be available for learning."[11]

There is little doubt that social work continuing education programs will not want for clientele. The challenge for continuing education programs will be not only in providing relevant knowledge but also in delivering that knowledge by an approach which takes into account the learner's life stage.

A final challenge implied by a lifelong learning approach is related to the broader range of clientele than are served by traditional continuing education programs.

Lifelong learning should be provided on multi-levels: to preprofessionals (high school), to professionals and, as importantly, to postprofessionals (retired social workers).

In the case of retired social workers, social work education should also provide for the continued learning needs of those no longer practicing, but none the less interested in continuing their involvement in the profession.

Social work certainly needs to tap these individuals as a rich source of experience, much of it quite relevant for the continuing education of currently practicing professionals.

It is suggested that a lifelong learning approach could be utilized in order to prevent social work continuing education from becoming too specifically focused on either a particular needs area or a given clientele.

NOTES

1. T. Walz, "A Continuing Education Curriculum for the Graduate Social Worker," Journal of Education for Social Work, 9 (1), (1973), p. 69.

2. S. Briaz, "The Future of Social Work: An Introduction," Social Work, Vol. 19 No. 5 (September 1974), p. 517.

3. M. Knowles, The Modern Practice of Education, (New York: Association Press, 1970), p. 38.

4. F. Fisher, "Give a Damn About Continuing Education," Public Administration Review, (November/December 1973), p. 489.

5. Roy Gregg, "The Realities of Education as a Prescription for Organizational Change," Public Administration Review, (November/December 1973), p. 532.

6. J. Yankey, "Marketing Strategy as an Aid to Curriculum Design," Public Welfare, Vol. 34 No. 4 (Fall 1976), p. 15.

7. N. Jones, "Continuing Education: A New Challenge for Psychology," American Psychologist, Vol. 30 No. 8 (August 1975), pp. 842-844.

8. P. C. Cohen, "Education for Change," Social Casework, 53 (4) (1972), p. 203.

9. _____, "The Status of Continuing Education: Voluntary and Mandatory," American Journal of Nursing, Vol. 77 No. 3 (March 1977), p. 412.

10. W. F. Mondale, "The Next Step: Lifelong Learning," Change, Vol. 8 No. 9 (October 1976), p. 44.

11. L. G. Swack, "Continuing Education and Changing Needs," Social Work, Vol. 20 No. 6 (November 1975), p. 475.